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ABSTRACT

This unit is designed to introduce secondary or post-secondary students to the ancient art of Chinese calligraphy through step-by-step instructions on writing Chinese characters. Because each character is made up of a series of single brush strokes, it is believed that if students learn to recognize these as components of completed characters, the written Chinese language will become less forbidding. It also is hoped that the unit will encourage students to experience the rhythm and sense of design in Chinese writing, thereby bringing an aesthetic dimension to their understanding of Chinese language. (DB)

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ED 364 436

CALLIGRAPHY

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SO 022 413

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CHINESE CALLIGRAPHY

I. A. Introduction

Calligraphy, the writing of characters, is an art which has developed over many centuries in China. This unit introduces students to this ancient art through step-by-step instructions on writing Chinese characters. As each character is made up by a series of single brushstrokes, the student will soon learn to recognize these as components of the completed character and the written Chinese language will become much less forbidding.

The exercises in this unit also encourage the students to experience the rhythm and sense of design in Chinese writing, thereby bringing an aesthetic dimension to their understanding of the Chinese language.

While the principles of calligraphy may be taught to students who have had no prior exposure to Chinese, we recommend that they complete the lessons in Demystifying the Chinese Language (another BAYCEP unit) beforehand.

What is calligraphy?

The word "calligraphy" is originally a Greek word meaning "beautiful writing." We usually associate this word with good penmanship, handwriting that is neat, legible and attractive. In China, however, calligraphy is regarded as an art form in itself and is admired and displayed in museums just as paintings are.

Moreover, calligraphy is often used to decorate articles of everyday use. For instance, when you go to a Chinese restaurant you may notice that the dishes are painted with characters as well as with colorful pictures. Even on the ordinary, everyday level of life, beautiful writing is appreciated.

I. B. Some Styles of Chinese Calligraphy

1. Oracle Inscriptions

The earliest known examples of Chinese writing are inscriptions on animal bones and tortoise shells dating from the 13th century B.C. during the Shang dynasty. These inscriptions were the records of divinations made by heating the bones or shells over a fire until cracks appeared on them. Predictions were read from the pattern of the cracks and recorded directly on the bone or shell. The figure on the left shows an oracle carved on the plastron of a tortoise. Note that the characters are composed of fairly straight lines with sharp endings. (Do you think these features might have something to do with the kind of materials used?)

2. The Great Seal Style

This term covers a broad range of styles which came into use during the Chou dynasty (1122-221 B.C.). Compared to the Oracle Style, these characters are more rounded at the corners and show a mixture of thick and thin strokes. Many of the surviving examples of this style, such as the one on the right, come from inscriptions that were cast on bronze vessels. At the bottom of the first column is the pictograph (picture-word) for "horse." The first word in the second column is also a pictograph. It shows "carriage" from a bird's eye view – a compartment with two wheels on either side, joined by an axle.

3. The Small Seal Style

In 221 B.C. the first unifier and emperor of China ordered that the writing system be standardized and established the style of his native state, Ch'in, as the model script of the empire. The round corners of this script, later known as the Small Seal Style, make it similar to the Great Seal Style. Here, however, the lines are all of an even thickness and the characters are very elongated so that they might be imagined to fit neatly into a vertical rectangle.

GATE

MOON, MONTH

HEAVEN

4. Clerical Style

During the Han dynasty (207 B.C.–220 A.D.) the Small Seal Style was surpassed in popularity by another script which could be written more quickly and easily with a brush. This style became known as the Clerical Style because most of the samples of this script were found on official documents such as government records of taxes, census records, deeds, etc. Notice the upward tilt at the end of the horizontal strokes which gives each character a fluid quality. This style is the forerunner of the Regular Style which we will look at next.

GATE MOON, MONTH HEAVEN

5. Regular Style

The Regular Style preserves the Clerical script's precision and modulation of line width but is less formal and heavy in appearance. Note that the horizontal lines generally slope upwards but do not have the final tilt at the end of the stroke which the Clerical Style has. Note also that the vertical lines are kept strictly vertical and do not lean away from the center of the character as in the Clerical Style. As students of calligraphy have traditionally mastered this style before attempting the others we will also use it as our model in learning to write Chinese.

ROAD, PATH, the "TAO" MOON, MONTH WINE MIDDLE

6. Running Style

As the name suggests, this style allows for more freedom and fluidity in movement. The strokes and dots that are written seperately in the Regular Style are here joined together in a single sweep of the brush, thus producing a feeling of speed and fluency.

ROAD MOON, MONTH LAKE MIDDLE

(Styles 1 through 4 are called "archaic" styles because they are no longer in use, except for special artistic purposes. Styles 5 and 6 are both in common use today and so, are called "modern" styles although, historically, they have been practised since the end of the 5th century A.D.)

I. C. Discussion Questions and Exercises

1. "Be a scribe in order that your limbs may grow smooth and your hands soft, that you may walk abroad in a white robe and that men of importance may greet you with respect...the profession of scribe is more profitable than any other profession. It makes you exempt from manual labor. There is no need to carry a hoe, a pickaxe or a basket, or to row a boat. Your life will be free from care."

These words of a school teacher in ancient Egypt were used to encourage his students to read and write well. In Egypt, as in China, only a small number of people were able to read and write.

What does the above quote tell you about that society's values?

If literacy enabled a person to have a good job and to gain the respect of society, why didn't everyone learn to read and write?

Considerations the teacher might bring up:
...the possibility that education was not open to some because of sex, class background, etc. Contrast the concept of education as a privelege with the concept of education as a right.
...the possibility that writing was used only for a few, special purposes (such as the oracle inscriptions) when it was thought necessary to have a permanent record of an event.

2. To what extent is your writing style determined by the instruments you use?

Specific questions the teacher might ask to encourage discussion:
- What kinds of lines are more easily made with a sharp instrument? Straight or round? Ask the students if they have ever tried to carve wood or carve letters on other types of hard surfaces.
- What are the advantages (and drawbacks) of writing with a pencil? a ballpoint pen? a felt tip pen? a fountain pen? Is any one of these tools more convenient to use than the others? Talk about such factors as speed of writing, expense of the tool, ability to correct mistakes, durability of the tool. In what situations would any of these instruments be preferred over the others? How do these tools compare with a brush? (Students might want to answer this last question after the calligraphy practice in Part II.)

3. Is good penmanship important in our society? Is it sometimes regarded as an art? How about the case of commercial lettering, the style and layout of lettering in advertisements and billboards?

4. Test your eye! Can you identify the styles of the following characters? (The meaning of each set of words is given at the beginning of the row.)

	a	b	c	d
1. Sun				
2. Tree				
3. Up				
4. Mountain				

Answer Key

1a.	Regular	b.	Oracle	c.	Sm. Seal	d.	Running
2a.	Clerical	b.	Oracle	c.	Running	d.	Sm. Seal
3a.	Gr. Seal	b.	Regular	c.	Oracle	d.	Clerical
4a.	Clerical	b.	Sm. Seal	c.	Regular	d.	Oracle

II. Calligraphy in the Classroom

A. Basic Materials

Brushes. Chinese brushes usually have bamboo handles but are sometimes made of other materials such as hard wood, ivory and porcelain. The brushes used for calligraphy should have stiff tips. Most commonly, these are made from the hair of wolves. A large size brush is easier for the beginner to handle. If Chinese brushes are not available, use Western-made paint brushes (Number 12) which can be purchased at any art supplies store.

Paper. Coarse textured, absorbent paper is needed for practising calligraphy. Blank newsprint is suitable for the beginner and we recommend it over the traditional "rice-paper" because it is much less expensive.

Ink. Ink can be purchased in two forms: liquid or stick. Grinding ink from an ink stick is laborious and time-consuming. We suggest that you purchase the liquid ink (most commonly imported from Japan and bottled in a plastic container) from an arts supplies store. This ink has a rather dense consistency and is easier to use if diluted with water. Give each student (or pair of students) a paper cup with the ink-water mixture of one part ink to four or five parts water.

Backing Paper. Three or four sheets of newspaper should be placed under the newsprint practice sheet to prevent ink from seeping onto the desk. Impress upon your students that this ink is highly indelible once it has dried and that they should avoid getting it onto their clothing.

Sink with cold running water. After the calligraphy practice, clean the brushes by holding them, tips pointed downwards, under a cold tap. Do not rinse them under hot water as this would dissolve the glue that holds the brush hairs together.

Stack of paper towels. For clean-up.

An effective way to demonstrate the strokes is for the teacher to draw them on the blackboard, using a brush and plain water. Tell the students to watch each stroke done on the blackboard before trying it on their practice sheets.

The students should be seated so that each one has a clear view of the board. School desks arranged in vertical rows are not ideal for this purpose. If possible, have them sit at long tables arranged in a "U" shape, facing the board.

B. Technique

Just as in learning to play a musical instrument or a sport, there is a technique to be mastered in learning Chinese calligraphy. The following exercises will familiarize the student with handling a brush and enable him to use it effectively.

1. Dip the bottom half of the brush in ink and holding it loosely make different kinds of shapes with it...zigzags, curves, dashes, dots. Try the same shapes with the brush held tightly. Do you see any difference in how the lines turn out?

Is there a difference in the lines just after the brush is dipped in ink and later when it has run drier? What if you vary the speed of your writing?

You may have noticed that your arm became tense when you held the brush tightly. You will find that you have the best control of your lines when you hold the brush rather firmly but keep your arm relaxed.

When freshly dipped in ink, the brush will go more smoothly over the paper and produce clearer shapes than when it's drier. If you load the brush with too mush ink, however, your lines will begin to spread out in blotches on the absorbent paper.

Most of you probably made the lines at about the same speed as you would sign your name. Try to write more slowly as this will give you better control over the direction of the brush.

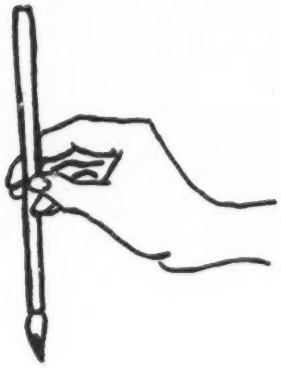
2. Write your initials (in script, not printed form) by pressing down at the start of each initial and gradually lifting the brush as you come to the end of the letter. Be sure to make each initial in one, slow, continuous movement. Now, reverse the technique. Begin each letter with the point of the brush lightly touching the paper and gradually press down on it as you continue the letter.

Compare the two sets of initials. In Chinese calligraphy it is essential to be able to vary the width of the strokes simply by applying a little pressure to the brush. If a line is too wide at one point or too narrow at another it cannot be "touched up" because the corrected area will show darker than the original stroke once the ink has dried. This is also a reason that each stroke must be done in one continuous movement.

3. Write a single horizontal line across the paper, alternately pressing and raising the brush. Now try it holding your hand about 4 inches above the paper (you will have to hold the brush farther away from its tip this time.)

You probably felt awkward in writing without any support for your hand and in having to hold the brush farther away from its tip than you normally hold a Western writing utensil. This method, however, gives you better leverage on the brush and because it makes you write with your arm and not just your wrist and fingers, your brushstrokes will be more lively and forceful.

4. The final step in learning the technique of calligraphy is knowing how to grasp the brush. Grasp it firmly between the thumb and first two fingers. Keep the ring and fourth fingers lightly behind the brush as a kind of balance.



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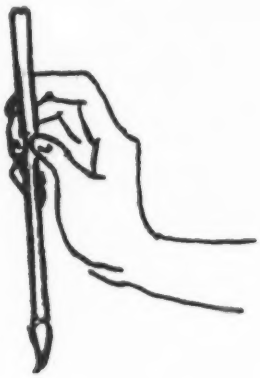


Always keep the brush in a strictly vertical position. Now, write the horizontal line of exercise #3 once more.

By holding the brush this way, strictly upright, you can use the entire tip of the brush when you write rather than just the side of it as when you hold it like a pen or pencil. Do you find that the points where you pressed down your brush this time are more distinct than in the lines of exercise #3?

Note: If the students find it too difficult at first to write without any support, have them place their left hand under their right wrist to serve as support.

C. Practice Makes Perfect: There are only eight different kinds of strokes in Chinese calligraphy! Every character is made of one or more of these strokes.

1. The Horizontal

a. Put your brush on the paper, press down at the start of the stroke.
b. Lift your brush slightly as you draw it leftwards to the middle of the stroke.
c. Press down again at the end of the stroke.

The dotted lines trace the path of the brush; "x's" mark points where you should press down with the brush.

You have just made the number, "one," in Chinese! Now make numbers "two" and "three."

(The second stroke should be longer than the first.)

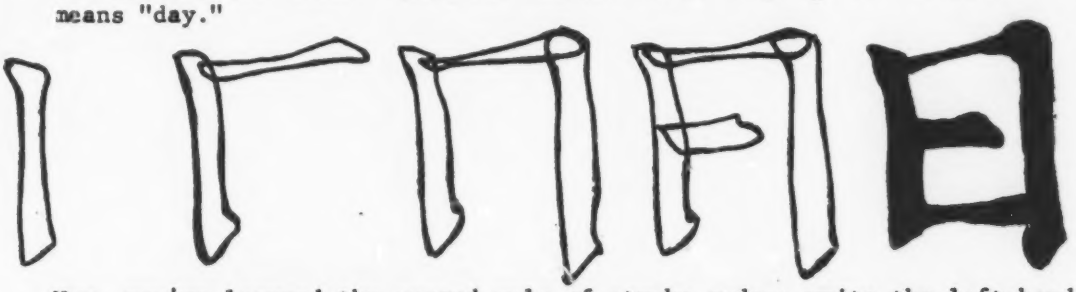
(The second stroke should be the shortest of them all and the third stroke should be the longest.)

Now, you have also learned the first rule of stroke order---the top part of the word should be written before the bottom part.

2. The Vertical. The Vertical is made with the same movements as the Horizontal.

a. Put your brush on the paper, press down at the start of the stroke.
b. Lift the brush up slightly as you draw it downward to the middle of the stroke.
c. Press down again at the end of the stroke.

Let's try some combinations of horizontal and vertical strokes. This is the word for "sun." (see its ancient forms on p.) It also means "day."

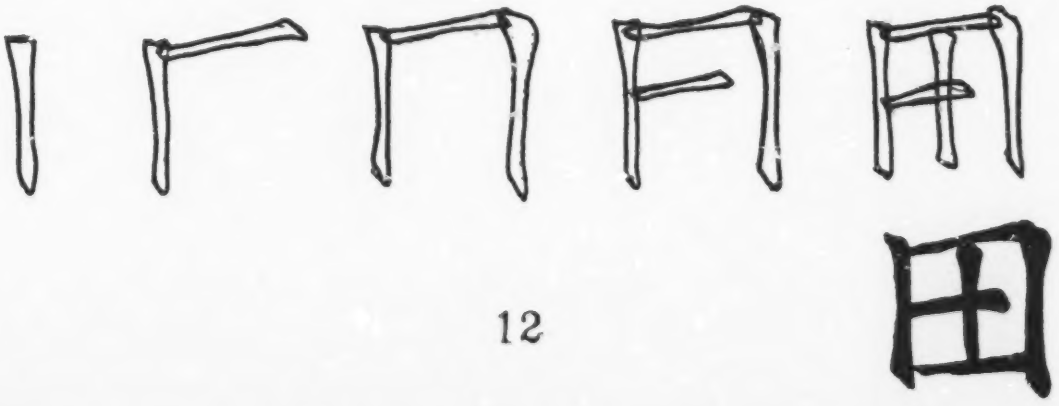


Now, you've learned the second rule of stroke order; write the left-hand part of a character before the right-hand part. If you want to write these dates, "the first (of the month)," "the second," "the third," they are written:

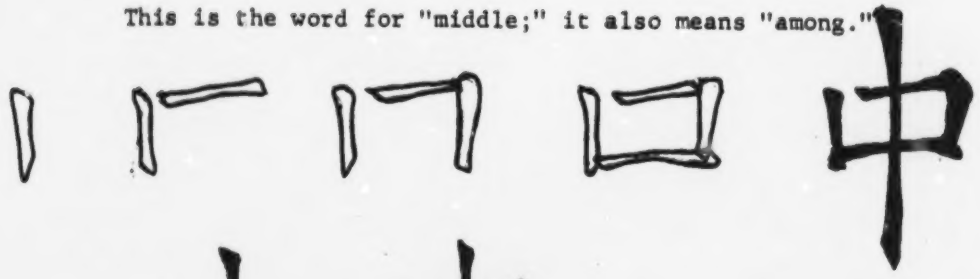
一日 二日 三日

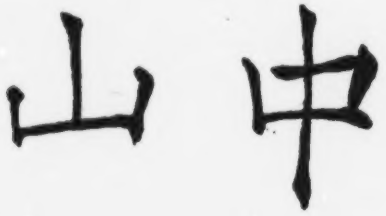
The word for mountain originally showed three peaks, .

This is the word for "field," showing an area divided by footpaths.



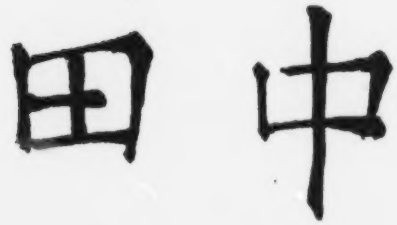
This is the word for "middle;" it also means "among."





"among the mountains"

"in the middle of the field"

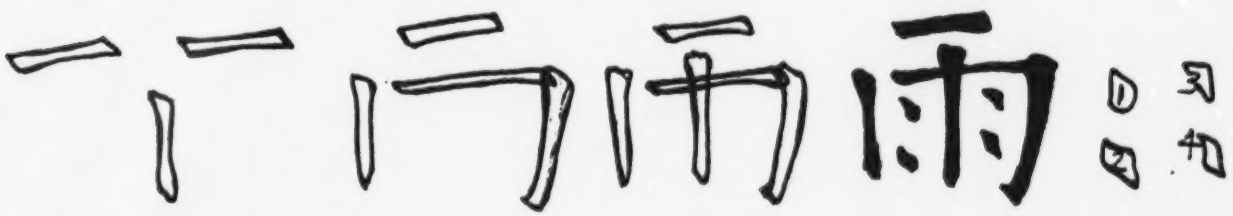


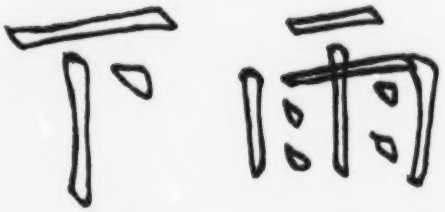
3. The Dot. The dot is basically triangular in shape. First, lightly touch the brush to the paper, then press down and bring the brush up again. If you have trouble making the last corner of the triangle, draw the brush around it as shown below.

This is the word for "up" or "above." It can also be used as a verb, "to go up." Make the dot point upwards a bit.

This is the word for "down," "below," "to fall down."
This

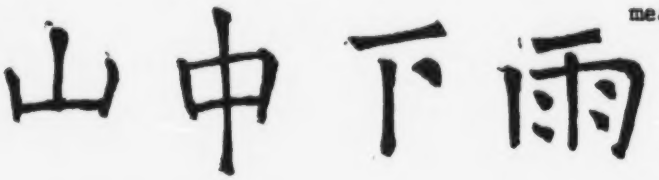
The word for "rain" should give you plenty of practice with dots!





means" It's raining."

means "----------?"



4. The Left-Slant. This stroke is made from the top right to the lower left. Lift the brush as you pull it to the left so that the stroke will become gradually thinner. Of course, remember to press down at the start of the stroke so that it will begin with a wide top.

5. The Right-Slant. This stroke is made from the top left to the lower right. Gradually put more pressure on the brush so that the end will be broad. Then, at the very end, lift the tip to make a point.

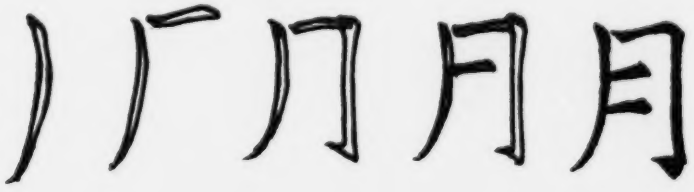
These two strokes make the word for "man."

To write "everyone," write "man" twice.

A man with his arms outstretched means "big."

6. The Hook. This is simply a vertical stroke with a leftward point on the end. Press down at the start of the stroke, lift at the middle and press down again at the end. Now that you have reached the lowest point of the stroke, lift the brush so that the tip barely touches the paper, press down and gradually lift up to make the tapering end.

This is the word for "moon, month." We saw it earlier in the examples of different styles of calligraphy.

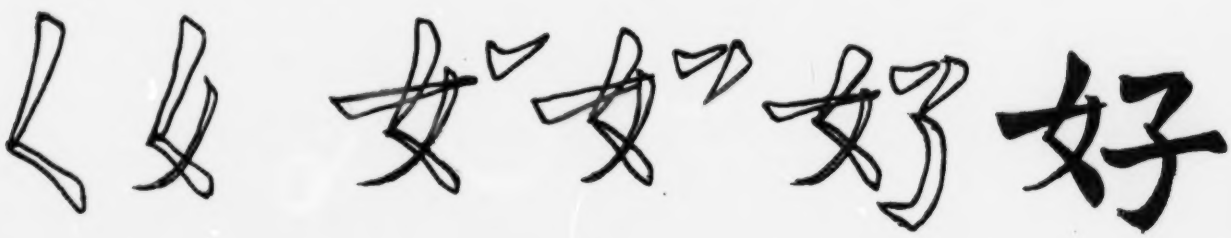


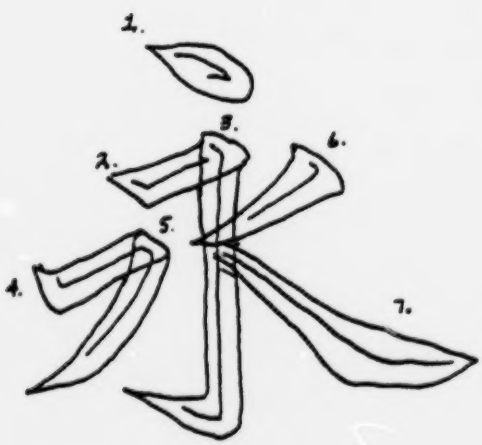
The word "bright" combines the words for "sun" and "moon."

7. The Down-Slant. This stroke is made from right to left, becoming thinner. Press down at the start of the stroke and gradually lift the brush to a point.

8. The Up-Slant. This is made the same way as the Down-Slant, but remember that you're going in the opposite direction, from left to right.

The Down-Slant and the Up-Slant are both used in the word for "good."





The character"yung" which means "eternal" uses all the strokes we have learned.

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